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ABSTRACT

As part of a study on development and the quality of life in northwestern Wisconsin, questions concerning important problems, public services, and environmental issues were asked of samples of 150 people in each of 4 west central counties (Clark, Dunn, Eau Claire, and Polk) in 1974. Responses to similar questions asked in a 1973 study of St. Croix County and in a 1974 statewide survey were used for comparisons. Responses to the areas of study were categorized as follows: (1) most important community problems (national economy, local economy, taxes, lack of public services, disorder, lack of cooperation, environment, other/don't know; no problems); (2) public services (job opportunities, public schools and libraries, fire protection, water supply, medical services, crime prevention/control, police relations, public transportation, neighborhood safety at night, streets/roads, stores/retail services, indoor and nearby recreation); (3) environmental concerns (stream, lake, and/or air pollution; soil erosion; wildlife reduction; litter; crowded recreation areas; noise; people living too close). Comparative analysis indicated economic problems of national scope were of primary concern in all counties, though a lack of local jobs and industry were also cited as problems; there was concern for lake pollution; public services were generally adequate, though there was a lack of public transportation and indoor recreation in Dunn, Polk, and St. Croix Counties. (JC)

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COMMUNITY PROBLEMS IN FIVE WEST CENTRAL COUNTIES

by

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U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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COMMUNITY PROBLEMS IN FIVE WEST CENTRAL COUNTIES

(Prepared by Virginia Lambert and Gary Linn)

The purpose of this report is to determine what the residents of West Central Wisconsin see as the major problems of their communities. Questions concerning important problems, public services, and environmental issues were asked of a sample of people in four counties (Clark, Dunn, Eau Claire, and Polk). The survey was conducted in late 1974, with approximately 150 people included from each county. Responses to similar questions asked in a 1973 study in St. Croix County, and in a 1974 state-wide survey are included as a basis for comparison.

Important Problems

Respondents were asked, "What is the most important problem facing the people of this community?" and, "What is the second most important problem?" The answers, by county, were combined into the nine categories shown in Table 1. The first part of the table shows the responses for the most important problem, and the second gives the answers to both questions combined.

The impact of the national recession in the region is evident in the importance given to economic problems. Economic problems stand out as the primary concern in all four counties and problems of national scope (inflation, high prices, low wages, low farm prices, etc.) are seen as more important than economic problems attributable to local conditions (a lack of jobs, lack of industry and growth, etc.). Judging from the responses in St. Croix in 1973, the overall importance of the economy

TABLE 1

MOST IMPORTANT COMMUNITY PROBLEMS CITIED BY RESPONDENTS

	1974 Study				1973 Study
	Clark	Dunn	Eau Claire	Polk	St. Croix
National Economy*	35%	29%	20%	29%	
Local Economy	9	10	15	15	8%
Taxes	3	4	12	2	16
Lack Public Services	11	28	12	15	24
Disorder	3	4	6	9	6
Lack Cooperation	7	6	12	6	4
Environment	1	0	2	4	13
Other/Don't Know	23	14	19	14	11
No Problems	8	5	2	6	19
THE TWO MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEMS (each person scored twice)					
National Economy*	42	36	27	39	
Local Economy	14	16	26	21	10
Taxes	6	5	16	2	20
Lack Public Services	19	51	25	33	43
Disorder	6	8	11	15	14
Lack Cooperation	11	18	19	8	7
Environment	1	2	4	9	21
Other/Don't Know	27	29	39	25	17
No Problems	75	35	33	48	60

*National and local economic problems not tabulated separately in the 1973 study.

has increased, although some of the difference between St. Croix and the others may be due to St. Croix's more favorable position with respect to the opportunities in the Twin Cities.

A lack of public services is second in importance to economic problems. This category includes reference to a lack of particular services as well as to deficient public services in general. This problem is particularly important in Dunn County, where public transportation and inadequate sewage systems are mentioned most often.

Lack of public services is less important in Clark County, and in Eau Claire, the most urban of the four counties. In Polk County, which like St. Croix has shown rapid population growth recently, a significant number of people cite the need for better services in general, and for more recreational facilities for youth.

An improvement in services usually means an increase in taxes. High taxes are not a major problem in any of the counties except Eau Claire. A comparison of responses by place of residence shows that taxes are most problematical for people in large cities.

Problems of disorder (crime, vandalism, drugs, traffic, alcoholism, misuse of welfare, spiritual problems, etc.), and a lack of cooperation (lack of communication, political problems, etc.) are cited less often. A lack of cooperation (especially on political problems) is mentioned somewhat more often in Eau Claire than elsewhere, and residents of Polk are more likely to refer to problems of disorder, probably reflecting the influx of tourists to the county.

Few people in any of the counties note environmental issues as among the most important community problems. This finding is surprising in view

of the relatively high percentage found in St. Croix in 1973. The same pattern of a decrease in citing environmental problems is also evident in comparing 1973 and 1974 responses in eight counties of the northwest region of Wisconsin, which were included in these studies (see Report No. 1). It seems that the increase in economic problems since 1973 has overshadowed environmental problems as the two primary concerns of the residents.

Environmental Problems

Although environmental problems appear as low priority among community problems, a more complete picture of the extent to which residents of these counties are concerned about the environment is given by addressing these problems directly. For nine environmental problem areas, people were asked to rate how serious the problems are locally--"very serious," "somewhat serious," "only a small problem," or "no problem at all." The percentages of people in each county saying that the problem is "very" or "somewhat serious" are shown in Table 2.

For several of the questions, a substantial proportion of people felt that the problem was "very" or "somewhat serious." The majority of those interviewed in Dunn, Eau Claire, and Polk Counties felt that lake pollution was more than a small problem in their area. Concern for stream pollution was also evident in Dunn (40 percent) and Eau Claire (49 percent), while in Clark (27 percent) and Polk (26 percent) the concern was somewhat lower. At least 30 percent of the people in all the counties said that wildlife reduction was a very or somewhat serious problem.

In general, the people in Clark County are least likely to see environmental problems in their area, while people in Eau Claire are most

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGE REPORTING ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEM AS "VERY" OR "SOMEWHAT SERIOUS," BY COUNTY.*

	Clark	Dunn	Eau Claire	Polk	(St. Croix) 1973	State
Stream Pollution	27	40	49	26	48	68[a]
Lake Pollution	22	50	54	54	48	
Soil Erosion	8	24	22	14	15	NA
Wildlife Reduction	33	36	36	30	29	NA
Litter	10	23	27	29	23	29
Crowded Recreation Areas	7	19	28	23	30	19
Air Pollution	7	10	20	10	16	42
Noise	5	8	13	7	NA	22
People Living Too Close Together	1	10	19	6	14	15

[a]In the state survey stream and lake pollution were combined into one question.

likely to report them, particularly urban type problems such as crowding and air and noise pollution.

Both air and water pollution were cited more often in the state-wide survey than in any of the West Central counties. But with over 50 percent of the people in three counties saying that lake pollution is more than a small problem, it is clear that people in this region are concerned about their environment.

Rating of Services

In order to get a clearer idea of the strengths and weaknesses of the public service structure in the counties, respondents were asked to rate particular services in their areas as "very good," "fairly good," "both good and bad," "not very good," or "not good at all." The percentages of people in each county saying that a service is "very good" or "fairly good" are shown in Table 3. If less than half said a service is good, it is underlined. People who did not know about a particular program were not included in the calculations of percentages. This is a relatively small group except in the case of "library and bookmobile services," where about a third of the sample in each county was excluded.

The predominance of economic problems is again evident in the low ratings given to job opportunities in all counties. Less than a third of the people say the job market is good everywhere, except in Clark County. The somewhat higher rating there may be due to the larger percentage of agricultural employment (43 percent). Overall, the job rating may have gone down since 1973. As indicated by the comparison of the rating of employment opportunities in St. Croix with the assessments for the other counties. However the ratings in St. Croix are probably strongly

TABLE 3

PERCENTAGE RATING LOCAL SERVICES AS "VERY GOOD" OR "FAIRLY GOOD," BY COUNTY*

	1974 Study				1973 Study	1974
	Clark	Dunn	Eau Claire	Polk	St. Croix	State As A Whole
Job Opportunities	36	28	22	31	42	NA
Public Schools	74	73	83	79	82	80
Public Library and Bookmobile	80	77	88	66	77	NA
Fire Protection	95	83	98	89	89	NA
Water Supply for Household Use	90	92	93	91	92	NA
Medical Services	68	71	80	80	NA	76
Crime Prevention and Control	69	57	80	51	76	70
Relations Between People & Police	80	75	79	67	83	NA
Neighborhood Safety at Night	90	82	87	75	NA	NA
Streets and Roads	74	68	61	65	70	56
Public Transportation	39	17	60	29	56	NA
Stores & Retail Services	65	67	78	69	NA	75
Indoor Recreation	65	51	66	47	53	68
Nearby Places for Recreation and Sports	76	66	77	64	NA	NA

*Percentages computed after excluding those who said they had no knowledge about the service. Percentages less than 50 percent underlined.

influenced by its closeness to the Minneapolis-St. Paul job market.

In terms of specific services, public schools, libraries and bookmobiles, fire protection and water supply for household use are scored high in all counties. Library and bookmobile services in Polk county are rated somewhat less favorably than elsewhere. The general rating of schools in the region is consistent with that for the whole state.

Medical services in Clark and Dunn Counties are assessed lower than those in Eau Claire and Polk, but, overall, the ratings in this region are on a par with those for the state as a whole.

The ratings on crime prevention and control are about the same or slightly more favorable here than in the state, except in Dunn and Polk counties. As noted previously, residents of Polk have a greater concern for problems of disorder than elsewhere. The relatively low ratings of crime prevention and control in this completely rural county and similarly low assessments in the open country areas of Clark and Dunn, may reflect the rising trend in rural crime. However, even with the concern for crime and disorder, neighborhood safety at night is considered to be good by 75 percent or more of the residents in each county, although assessments in Polk are somewhat lower than elsewhere. Ratings of relations between the people and the police are generally high in the region with the lowest scores again occuring in Polk county.

Ratings of local streets and roads are higher in all of these counties than in the state as a whole. However, lack of good public transportation is a major problem. Only in St. Croix, in 1973, and in Eau Claire, where funds recently have been directed toward improving the city bus service, do at least half of the residents think that public transportation is good. The problem is particularly critical

in Dunn County. Comparing the responses by place of residence of the respondents shows that, in general, public transportation is rated lowest by the residents of villages and rural nonfarm areas. While urban public transportation systems have been encouraged recently as a result of the energy crisis, intercity public transportation has gradually been cut back. Residents of villages and rural areas, who often must travel long distances for work, recreation, or shopping appear to feel this loss most acutely. However, in Dunn County, residents of the city of Menomonie also give low assessments.

Stores and retail services are evaluated somewhat lower than in the state as a whole, except in Eau Claire County, where the City of Eau Claire serves as a major trade center. Ratings of indoor recreation are also lower in the West Central Region than in the State, with the least favorable assessments in Polk, Dunn, and St. Croix Counties. The lowest scores are given in the villages and in rural areas. Places for outdoor recreation are rated higher than facilities for indoor recreation, but, again, residents of rural areas give less favorable ratings than those of the cities.

Conclusion

The economy stands out as a major problem in the West Central counties, primarily in terms of the national recession but also as related to local conditions such as a lack of jobs and a lack of industry. While environmental concerns are not cited often as among the most important community problems, people are aware of and concerned with problems of their environment, especially lake pollution.

Services in the region are generally considered to be good and equal to those in the state as a whole. However, there is a lack of adequate public transportation, and insufficient opportunities for indoor recreation, especially in Dunn, Polk and St. Croix Counties.